

I want to thank Ross, Bruce, and Leslie for leading worship while Judy and I were on vacation. We had not taken a Sunday off for over nine months and needed this time of renewal. Over the years, we like to spend time at our favorite vacation spot which is a cabin on Lake Jocassee on the border of North and South Carolina. This is a 7500 acre lake surrounded by the Blue Ridge Mountains. To me, it is one of the most beautiful and inspiring places in the world. I used the time there to read and reflect on the ministry God has called me to. I also had the opportunity to visit Clemson University where I went to engineering school, and our tree farm in the Piedmont area of the state where I grew up. We also spent several days at Myrtle Beach with our son Jack, his wife Erin, and our granddaughter Eleanor. It was also a great chance for me to visit my brother and one of my nieces, and Judy to spend time with her sister and brother. It was a time of fellowship and catching up on things.

You know at my age, I enjoy going back to familiar sites and memories. So as I was sitting on the screened porch of the cabin looking out at the trees, the lake and mountains in the background, I reflected on life and some of the lessons that it has taught me. Let me share some of these with you this morning. Let's call this "Reflections from the Lake." Our scripture references will be from two passages that the Apostle Paul wrote that provide guidance for all of us as we journey through life. The first one is found in the third chapter of Philippians, verses 12 through 14, and the other one is from the twelfth chapter of Romans, verses 1 and 2.

Read Philippians 3:12-14

Read Romans 12:1-2

As I look back over my seventy-seven years, I see transition points in my life that many of you have also experienced, such as graduating from high school and college, getting married, getting a job, starting a career, buying a home, having children, and then retiring; which by the way, I have failed twice. A better term for me is retreading. I have often thought of life as a series of ladders that you use to scale a series of the ever-increasing plateaus of life, one at a time. Once you climb your way to the top of one ladder, you soon discover that you are at the bottom rung of the next ladder. For example, when you are a high school senior, you are on top of the world. Then you graduate and either go to college or enter the workplace and quickly realize that you are starting at the bottom all over again. The same thing happens when you graduate from college. You don't start out at the top of any company or organization unless your father happens to own the company. And then you spend your career climbing the career ladder to the top only to retire and find out that your new boss is now your wife! One wife defined retirement as "twice as much husband, and half as much income."

I have also found that when you reach a particular plateau in life, you also discover that there are several ladders that will take you to the next plateau. And which ladder you choose will have a significant impact upon how successful, productive and happy your life will be. The tragedy is that many people choose the wrong ladder and waste a lifetime climbing the wrong ladder.

As I indicated earlier, life is full of transition points, and each of us is either at or approaching one of those points in our lives today. So let me try and shed some light on how to choose the best ladders to climb in life based on the passages that I just read. First, don't let the world transform you; instead why don't you transform the world. You do this by staying focused on God. Here's how the *Message* paraphrases our text from the 12th chapter of Romans: "So here's what I want you to do; God helping. Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for us is the best thing you can do for Him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without thinking. Instead fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what He wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops a well-formed maturity in you."

Paul tells us to not conform to this world. In other words, don't get sucked in by its low moral values. This world is a seductive place with all kinds of temptations. And if you let your guard down, it will draw you down with it. Instead Paul tells us to be transformed, to become the person God created you to be. As living and breathing human beings, we are on a quest to find out who we are. It is a lifetime search for the right ladder to climb. So how do you do this, how do you choose the right ladder? Well, let me use some examples to demonstrate the difference between the ways of the world and God's way.

One of the bad habits of this world is that it always looks for the easy way out. Some people develop the habit of not sticking with a project, relationship or something else for the long haul. The minute things get difficult, they bale out. I have seen this disease all my life – people who will not stick with anything. Oh, it starts out with some little thing, but then later becomes a way of life. And the reasons for this quitting attitude vary from the fear of hard work, short attention span, only in it for the immediate recognition – they are gone the minute the cameras and crowds leave, and maybe just the lack of every day excitement; in other words, it becomes routine and too much like old fashion work.

Gandhi said that his grandfather once told him that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who do the work and those who take the credit. He told Gandhi to try to be in the first group; there was less competition there. I think you may see where I am heading. Don't be afraid of an honest day's work. As a matter of fact, I consider work to be one of the true

blessings in life, to be able to do something and be productive, to make a difference in this world.

In Hebrews 12:1, Paul tells us “to run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” I think that perseverance is one of the most foreign words in our society today. Most people can’t even spell it; much less know what it means. And very few people actually practice it. But perseverance is one of the biblical secrets to a happy and productive life.

The dictionary defines perseverance as “steadfast adherence to a course of action, belief, or purpose.” In other words sticking it out when the going gets tough, not quitting or giving in when things don’t go just the way you want them to. Now I’m not going to sugar-coat it for you, as most of us know, there will be tough times in life, but you can make it through those rough times if Jesus is your constant companion. Paul tells us in the fifth chapter of Romans that “suffering produces perseverance, perseverance produces character, and character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out His love for us.” You can make it through anything life throws your way because God is with you and nothing is impossible for God.

Another thing that is lacking in our society today is vision. People with vision are as rare as low gas prices these days. People just don’t set goals or have a clear purpose in life anymore. It is a fact that your life can’t go according to plan if you don’t have a plan. So set goals for your life and set them a little higher than you think you can attain. Make it worth shooting for. Paul tells us in the text that I read earlier from the third chapter of Philippians to press on for what Christ has already set aside for us. Now to me this means not only eternal life and salvation, but also the abundant life He promised to all who believe in Him in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John. God has a purpose for each one of us and we will never attain it if we sit just back and don’t work at it. So, find your purpose in life, what God is calling you to do and then give it your all, your best, don’t hold anything back.

Paul also gives us some additional practical advice in this text from Philippians. He says: “But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what lies ahead.” Too many people today don’t heed Paul’s advice and are always living in the past, rehashing the same old stories or hurts over and over again. We are called to live in the present and move towards the future. When you reach a transition point in life, it is time to move on and forget the past. You can’t climb the next ladder if you are always looking back over your shoulder at what happened on the previous plateau. If you do, I guarantee you that you will fall off the ladder because you will still be carrying and dragging all those weights that the writer of Hebrews tells us to cast off. The only way to reach the next plateau is to keep your eyes on your goal, remain focused on what you are trying to do.

One day three boys were playing in a snow covered field. A man came up to them and asked if they wanted to race across the field for a prize. Of course, the boys agreed, and the man told them that he would go to the other side of the field and give them the signal as to when to start. However, the winner would not be the one who was the fastest, but the one whose footsteps were the straightest in the snow. As the race began, the first boy started looking at his feet to make sure if his steps were straight. The second boy kept looking at his companions to see what they were doing, but the third boy just ran on with his eyes fixed on the man on the other side of the field. The third boy was the winner for his footsteps were straight in the snow. He kept his eyes on the goal ahead of him. If we keep our eyes focused on Jesus Christ, there will be less twists and turns in our lives, and life will be more enjoyable and fulfilling. Hebrews 12:2 tells us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, who both began and finished the race of life each of us are now in.

And in the same spirit of forgetting the past, we should always look for the best in people we encounter and the situations that life gives us. Believe me; there are enough negative people in this world already. In this life people have one of two attitudes; either the glass is half full or half empty. I have found that the people who view life's glass as half full are the ones who are successful, productive and the happiest. These are the people that you want to be around, not the ones who look like they have been baptized with vinegar instead of holy water. Life is a cup to be filled, not drained.

A child psychologist wanted to observe how different children would respond to negative circumstances. So they filled a room full of horse manure and put a pessimistic child in there to observe how he would respond. As expected, he whined and cried because he was in a room full of smelly manure. Then they placed an optimistic child in the room, and he started tearing around the room, digging in the manure with an excitement that baffled the on-lookers. After a few moments of watching this, they asked him why he was so excited. To which he replied: "With all this manure in here, there's got to be a pony in here somewhere." Now that's the attitude we should all have in life, there's a pony in here somewhere.

One evening as Judy and I sat on one of the docks on the lake, it began to rock due to the waves created by a small boat passing by in the middle of the lake. It reminded me that we can never fully understand the ripple effect that our words and actions, no matter how small, can have on others. We need to be careful what we say and how we treat others. We should always ask ourselves: "Is this something Jesus would say or do?"

Paul gave us additional advice for living life in Philippians 4:11-12 where he wrote: "I have learned to be content whatever the situation." In other words, when life gave him lemons, he made lemonade; he made the best of whatever life threw his way. I remember a card that I gave my youngest son when he was playing baseball. It read: "When life throws you a curve

ball, hit a homerun.” In Philippians 4:13, Paul gave us his secret - he could do all things through Christ who gave him the strength he needed for each day.

One last reflection from my time at the lake; as I have climbed the ladders and traversed the plateaus of life, I have found that I have been able to traverse the rough spots and potholes in the road of life due to my personal relationship with the Lord. He has been there for me in the times of celebration and in the times of sadness; He has been there in the times of transition and the times of climbing the ladder one rung at a time. Without His love and support, I would not have made it this far. When you stop and look back over your life, you soon realize that all the money, fame, titles, and whatever don't mean a thing when compared to your personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I hope and pray that you feel the same way. The road of life is a lot easier when Jesus Christ is your constant companion. Amen